#15184673 72 ID: 98077679 HD 170 .B563 no.93

BLM ALASKA
FRONTIERS
Issue 93 • Fall 2004
News about BLM-managed public lands in Alaska

Lightning, smoke, & wildfires batter state and break records

The Big Heat

Fires of 04
SPECIAL REPORT

Fire season in Alaska usually ends by mid-July as summer rains quench the flames. Then our fire crews head south to battle blazes in the Lower 48.

Not this year... record heat, record dryness, and record lightning meant Alaska needed all the help it could get, and more.

Some fires may burn until the snow falls.

On the evening of June 12, 2004, two lightning strikes hit spruce trees along the Taylor Highway south of the tiny town of Chicken. While hardly the first lightning of the season, these two strikes and the gigantic Chicken #1 fire they started proved emblematic of what was to be one of Alaska's most memorable fire seasons.

Early forecasts had predicted a normal fire season for the state, which received between 70 and 120 percent of normal snowpack. Only in areas of below-normal snowpack, (primarily the Upper Yukon area in northeastern Alaska) was above-normal fire activity expected. Heavy spring rains gave no warning of what was to come.

Then early June brought record-low precipitation and record-high temperatures – conditions that quickly increased fire danger to extreme levels.

On June 14, two days after the Chicken #1 fire started, the state received nearly 8,500 lightning strikes statewide, breaking a 2002 record.

As the fire near Chicken took off, so did others across the state. The

–continued on page 2

Big Heat, *continued from page 1*

Pingo fire, part of the 804,000-acre Solstice Complex, advanced to within several miles of the village of Venetie. The Camp Creek Fire near Delta Junction forced partial evacuation of the Pogo gold mine.

Smoky skies

Fire season always overlaps with tourist season in Alaska, but this year a large number of fires burned on or near the state's major highways, quickly leading to economic impacts on the tourism industry. Tour companies scrambled to rearrange itineraries after their buses were stopped or delayed by fires in both Alaska and Canada. Hotels and restaurants felt the pinch as well. When highways reopened, many tourists didn't stop to shop – they were eager to move on, to get as far away as possible from the smoke.

"This is my trip of a lifetime, my chance to finally visit Alaska," one tourist complained to fire information officer Craig McCaa on the Taylor Highway, "and I can't see anything but smoke."

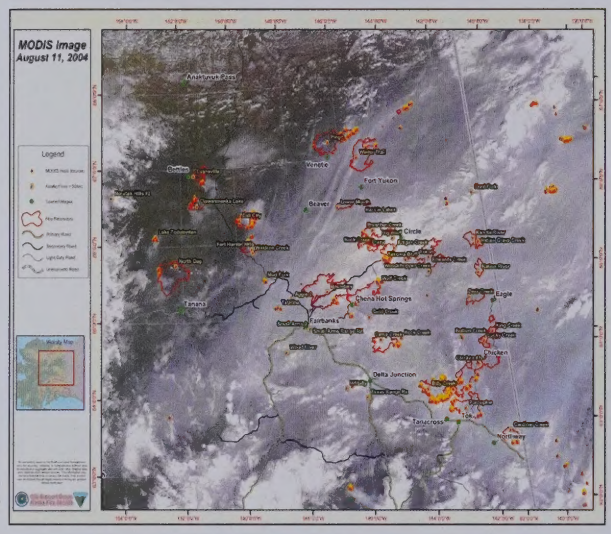
That smoke was thick. On June 28, air quality monitoring equipment in Fairbanks topped out at 1,000 micrograms per cubic meter, the highest level the instruments could record. Some offices closed and health officials warned people to stay indoors.

Fires everywhere

By the end of June more than 800,000 acres had burned in Alaska. Especially hard-hit were the eastern and central portions of the state.

In part, the fires' economic impact was mitigated by the money pumped into local economies by firefighters and the contractors who supported them. At a public meeting held at the Tok School on July 1, fire officials pointed to the meals eaten by firefighters at restaurants, the locally owned vehicles rented, and a myriad of other contracts for firefighter support. But there was no question that communities and

Collin Cogley



AFS

Chad Thompson

Craig McCaa

(front cover) **Numerous fires along the Dalton Highway did not damage the trans-Alaska pipeline.** (top) **Helitack crew near Nome Creek, White Mountains,** (middle left) **satellite image showing fires and smoke in mid-August;** (middle right) **North Dag fire burning near Tozitna River in mid-July,** (bottom left) **Porcupine fire looms above roadblock at Tetlin Junction.**

businesses were suffering.

By then, Alaska fires were grabbing national attention and resources began to pour into the state. For the first time, fire engines and even shower and catering units were ordered from the lower 48 states to help in firefighting efforts. By the end of the summer an unprecedented three of the nation's 16 Type 1 incident management teams, used on the largest, most complex fires, were either in Alaska or on their way.

A veritable air force was assembled to support firefighting efforts on the ground. Firefighters were helped by 11 air tankers, two infrared reconnaissance planes, three smokejumper planes, five air attack planes, seven aircraft for shuttling crews and overhead, and a fleet of helicopters of all sizes. The military supplied eight Blackhawk helicopters.

To handle the crushing number of calls from the national media and concerned residents, fire officials set up the interagency Joint Information Center in Fairbanks. At the height of the season the center was staffed with 12 information officers working from 4 a.m. to 11 p.m. On July 19 the center fielded 600 telephone calls.

Meanwhile the weather was still providing surprises. On July 15 the state's record for most lightning strikes in a single day fell again, with 9,022 lightning strikes starting 11 new blazes in the state.

"What was unusual this year was the dominant, persistent high-pressure system that stayed in place over Alaska for two-and-a-half months this summer," said Skip Theisen, BLM's fire management officer and a 20-year veteran of Alaska firefighting.

"Every time it would retreat we would get new starts. Then it was back to hot and dry conditions. The high pressure system didn't allow any of the wetter storm systems in that usually end our fire season."

The hot, dry weather continued into September, at which point more than 90 fires were still active throughout the state. Nine of those were being actively suppressed with the rest in either limited suppression or monitor status.

A new record

If there was a bright spot in the 2004 fire season, it was an impressive safety record of a firefighting force that at its peak topped 2,700 people.

"Given the level of risk resulting from the length of this active fire season, and the conditions from heavy smoke and high temperatures, Alaska has an exceptional safety record," said safety and occupational health specialist Julie Wheeler of the Alaska Fire Service in late August.

"There have been no critical injuries or fatal accidents during this fire season. The vast majority of medical responses have been for twisted ankles and knees, colds and sore throats, cuts, scrapes and other minor injuries, all typical to wildland fire activities."

The fires' continued burning in September made it clear that the 2004 season was one for the record books. The total acreage burned topped 6 million acres, by far the most acres burned in a single year since Alaska started keeping reliable records in 1950. The Taylor Complex fires near Tok accounted for more than a million of those acres.

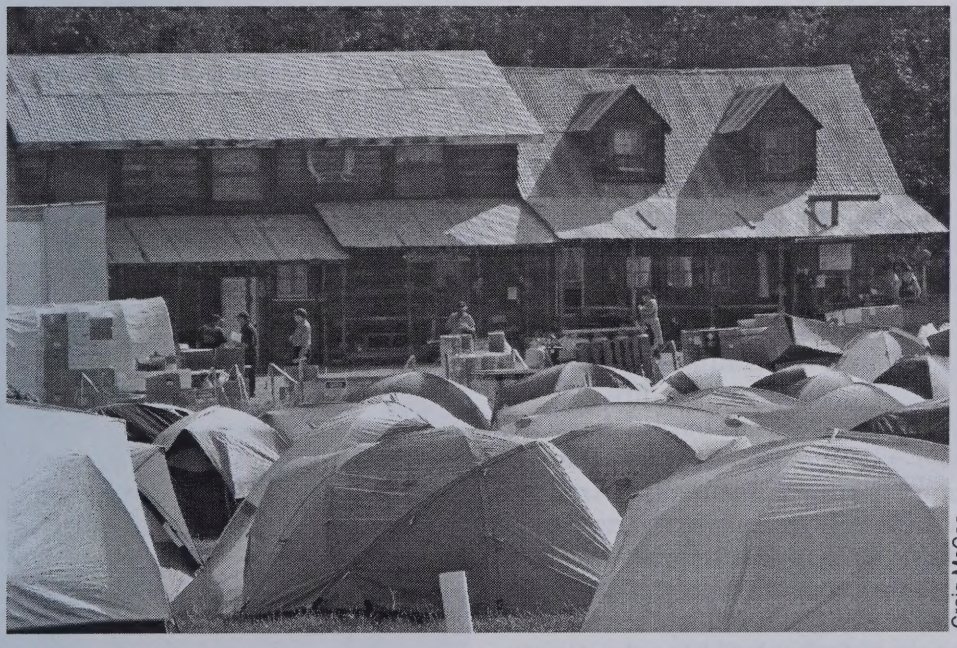
This also will be Alaska's most costly fire season. On August 18, with about 95 fires still burning, the Alaska Interagency Coordination Center reported that combined federal-state firefighting costs would likely exceed $55 million. This figure included costs only for larger fires with incident management teams; the full cost will certainly go much higher.

Reflecting on a long, smoky summer, longtime Central resident Jim Crabb may have said it best: "I've never seen a fire season like this one, and I hope I never do again."

– Craig McCaa and Janelle Smith

Alaska's Worst Fire Years
(in terms of acreage burned)

2004: 6,424,805 acres (as of 9/7)
1957: 5,049,661 acres
1969: 4,231,820 acres
1990: 3,189,427 acres
1977: 2,295,808 acres
1988: 2,137,642 acres
1991: 1,667,965 acres



Craig McCaa

Incident command post at Circle Hot Springs Resort. Numerous fires nearby known as the Central Complex stymied firefighers for weeks.

Craig McCaa

Fire blackens White Mountains

The half-million-acre Boundary Fire received national news coverage for threatening Fairbanks subdivisions and Steese Highway travelers. Less known is that it burned 209,000 acres, or roughly one-fifth, of the White Mountains National Recreation Area.

During late June and July the fire burned across more than 70 miles of winter trails and destroyed Crowberry Cabin, one of BLM's popular recreational use cabins. Two other cabins probably would have met the same fate if planes hadn't dropped fire retardant on them.

Lon Kelly, a Northern Field Office outdoor recreation planner, said BLM will be busy this fall and winter removing downed trees from the trails and replacing markers and signs that burned in the fire.

Installing new trail markers on the winter trails will be high priority. "People losing the trail – that's serious out there," Kelly said. "You go off the trail and you're up to your neck in snow."

BLM has ordered materials to replace Crowberry Cabin, but won't be able to start construction until next year, Kelly said.

Effects of the Boundary fire are inescapable in Nome Creek Valley, one of BLM's main summer use areas in the White Mountains. The fire crossed virtually the entire valley, although firefighters succeeded in saving both BLM campgrounds.

Visitors to the Table Top Mountain trail, a three-mile hiking loop in lower Nome Creek Valley, are confronted by an expanse of incinerated spruce trees. The fiberglass sign marking the trailhead melted around its post during the fire.

Each step into the burned forest raises a swirl of ash. In places the ground burned so hot that the trail is visible only as a slight depression in the ash. In other places the trail didn't burn but left a green ribbon of grass winding between scorched branches of what had been an excellent blueberry patch.

The burned forest is eerily quiet. What's missing is the faint whisper of wind rustling through spruce needles. Instead hikers hear only the creaking of snags tottering on their charred roots and the percussive chirps of a group of juncos flitting among the bare, black branches.

Though some areas were thoroughly blackened, the surrounding forest didn't burn completely. The view across the valley from the trail shows a mottled landscape of black, reddish orange, and green. Fingers of burned forest reach down the gentle hillslopes toward lush riparian areas untouched by fire.

Underfoot are other signs that recovery from the fire is under way. A green fringe of new grass sprouts from the charred and bristly tops of tussocks. Tiny cloudberry leaves peek out from under an orange apron of torched tundra. A fresh moose print is pressed in the black ash.

"This is a wonderful opportunity

to show people how burned areas recover from wildfire," says NFO park ranger Sandy Westcott. "Visitors will be able to see how quickly Nome Creek Valley greens up. It's already happening."

Burned areas do present some hazards that visitors need to be aware of, Westcott said. Burned trees can topple over without warning. Hidden holes where fire has burned roots or duff beneath the surface can lead to broken bones or sprains. And without a protective cover of vegetation, soils in burned areas are extremely susceptible to erosion, so visitors should stay on existing roads and trails.

–Craig McCaa

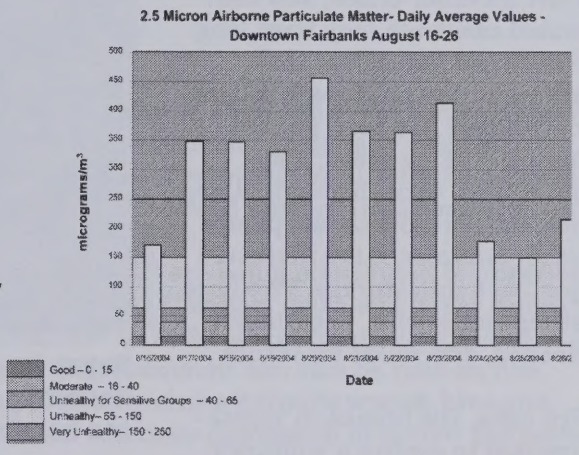
Collin Cogley

Craig McCaa

Where there's fire... there's smoke

Craig McCaa

Smoke hit Fairbanks hard this summer, choking the city for weeks with hazardous levels of particulates in quantities beyond the range instruments could measure. This photo was taken on Airport Way at 10 a.m. on August 23.


2.5 Micron Airborne Particulate Matter- Daily Average Values -
Downtown Fairbanks August 16-26
micrograms/m³
Date
Good – 0 - 15
Moderate – 16 - 40
Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups – 40 - 65
Unhealthy– 65 - 150
Very Unhealthy– 150 - 250

Smoke from Alaska wildfires spread throughout Alaska to Kenai to Kodiak to Ketchikan. It also combined with smoke from fires burning in the Yukon Territory and moved on across the northern United States, southern Canada and beyond.

(opposite page) **Table Top Mountain Trail near Nome Creek Road is one of many trails in the White Mountains NRA that will look a lot different to this winter's visitors.** (above left) **Table Top Mountain trailhead sign shortly after the Boundary Fire passed through.** (left) **Trail sign melted by intense heat.**

The work doesn't end when the flames are put out

Nalon Smith

Rehab line near Moose Creek Cabin, White Mountains, following the Boundary Fire. Pulling vegetation back over fire lines and other efforts can help prevent permafrost from melting in sensitive areas.

The television camera crews may have left for other crises, and the evacuated residents may have long since returned home. But that doesn't mean the hard work is over after a wildfire has been put out.

Camps, staging areas, and helibases need to be dismantled and cleaned up. Portable tanks, pumps and other equipment are inspected and put back into storage. Fire hose, sometimes miles of it, is gathered up, cleaned, and rolled for future use.

Fire lines, the breaks in vegetation created to control a wildfire's spread, also need special attention. Whether constructed with hand tools or bulldozers, fire lines often must be rehabilitated to prevent erosion and other environmental damage.

The rehab work typically begins as soon as heavy equipment is available. In Alaska prompt attention is especially important where removal of vegetation during fire line construction has left frozen soils (permafrost) vulnerable to melting during hot summer weather.

"You have to get going on rehab as soon as possible," said the Northern Field Office's fire management officer Skip Theisen. "If you don't, your line can turn into a creek, then a ravine."

Resource advisors, employees with valuable local knowledge of public lands, play an important role in ensuring that the work is done properly.

NFO's Collin Cogley, an outdoor recreation planner, served as one of several resource advisors on the Boundary fire, one of the state's largest wildfires of 2004.

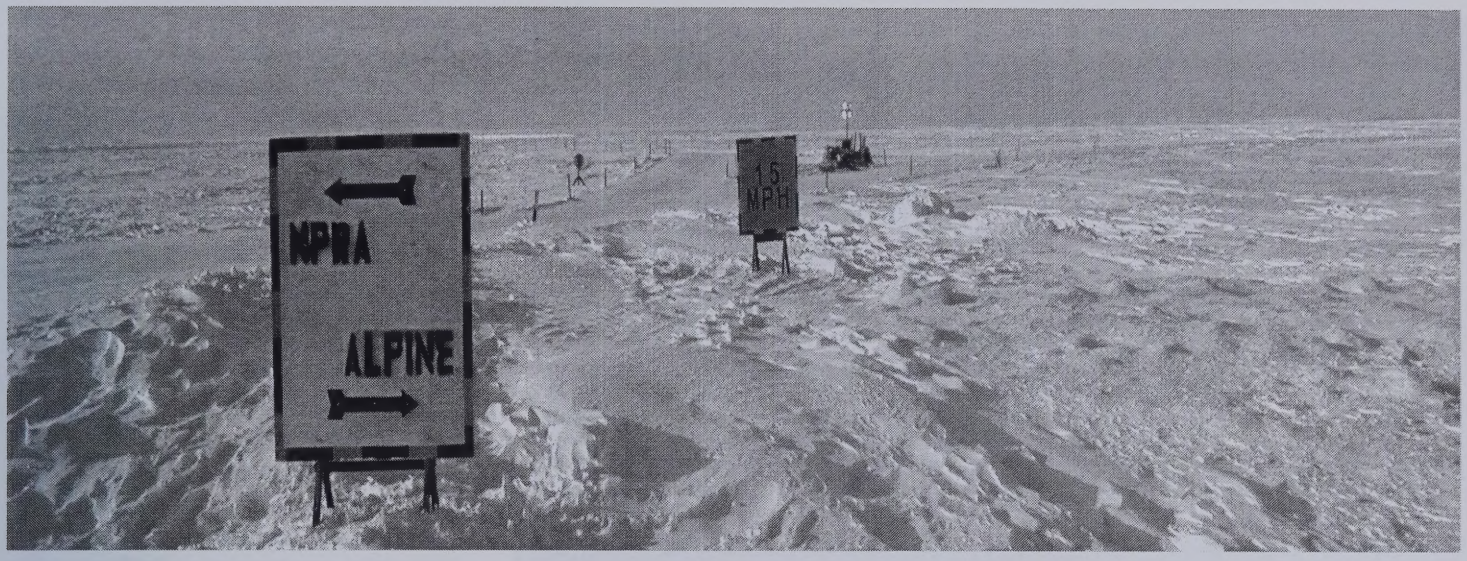
Among his tasks was overseeing the rehabilitation of several miles of bulldozer line that crossed into the White Mountains National Recreation Area from the Haystack subdivision, which had to be evacuated during the Boundary Fire.

Cogley, who spent several seasons on a hotshot crew, worked with firefighters and heavy equipment operators to pull vegetation back onto disturbed areas and to construct water bars to divert runoff away from sensitive areas.

"The people I worked with did a good job, especially considering that many of them aren't familiar with the frozen soils and unique vegetation we have in Alaska," Cogley said.

"One thing we emphasized was minimizing traffic along the fire lines. That's because even tracked vehicles crossing the same spot several times can compact the vegetative mat and cause permafrost to melt. That's not obvious to people who haven't seen it happen."

–Craig McCaa



Which way for Alpine?

BLM releases preferred plan for Alpine Satellites project

BLM released the Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Alpine Satellites Development Plan, a proposal by ConocoPhillips Alaska, Inc. to develop five satellite oil accumulations in the northeast National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska and in the Colville River delta. Details appeared in the Sept. 3, 2004 issue of the *Federal Register*.

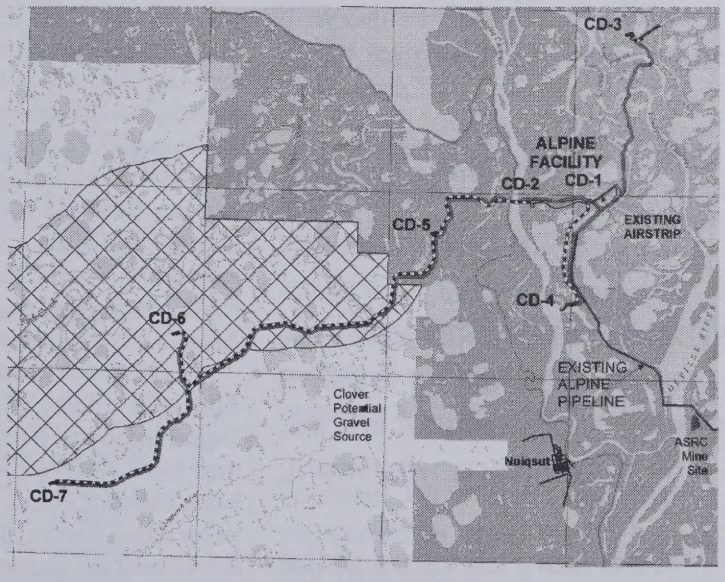
The Final EIS contains the agency-preferred alternative, an alternative that modifies the company's original proposal in several areas. Some of the major changes proposed include: relocating portions of proposed gravel access roads and pipelines outside a three-mile setback for Fish Creek, raising pipelines an additional 2 feet (to 7-feet high) to assist migrating caribou, lengthening the bridge across a channel of the Colville River, moving power lines from separate poles to cable trays mounted on the pipeline supports, and adding environmental enhancements to the access road to pad CD-4.

"We made a number of adjustments to reflect considerations raised by the public and other agencies," said BLM's Alaska State Director Henri Bisson. "Several key changes responded specifically to concerns about subsistence issues raised by residents of Nuiqsut which will also help protect the environment," he said. "It is also important to note that what we are proposing is consistent with the 1998 plan for this area. Some production and development facilities will be located within the Fish Creek three-mile setback. This is consistent with the exception clause outlined in the 1998 plan because it is both environmentally preferable and is necessary to maximize recovery of oil and gas resources," continued Bisson.

The development plan represents an important expansion of the Alpine field, one of the largest discoveries in the U.S. in decades. Originally estimated at 365 million barrels of recoverable oil, exploration has led estimates to be revised upward to 429 million barrels.

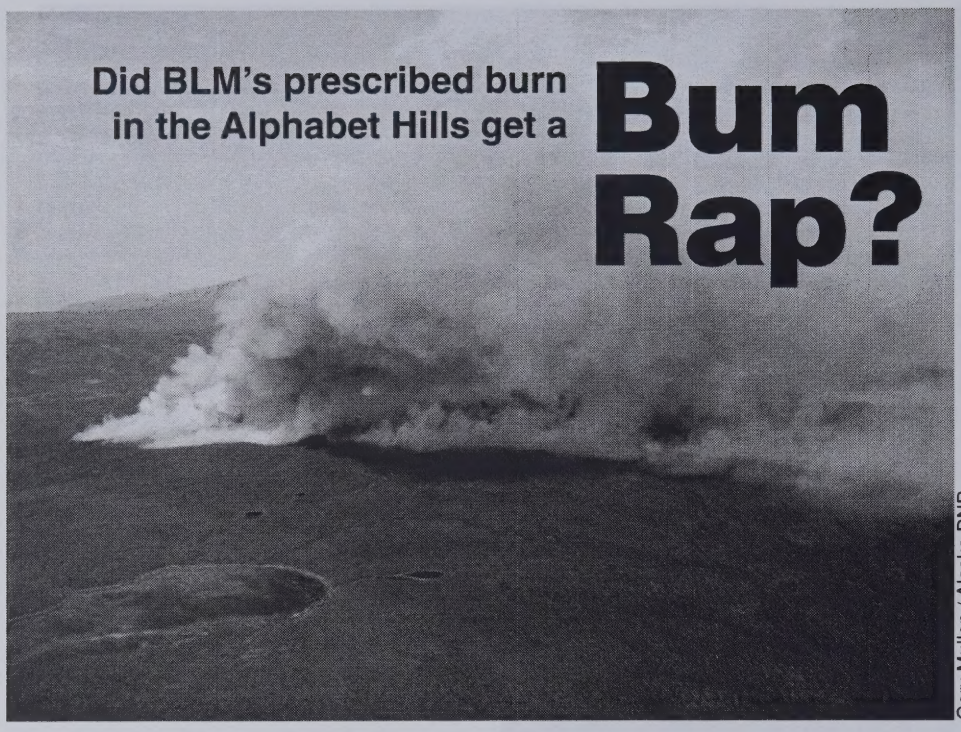
Copies of the EIS are being distributed to libraries throughout Alaska. Compact disks and paper copies will be available at BLM offices in Anchorage and Fairbanks. The document can also be read on line through the BLM website **http://www.ak.blm.gov.**

The public will have one month to review the document.



Two of five proposed well pads are within the national petroleum reserve.

Did BLM's prescribed burn in the Alphabet Hills get a Bum Rap?



Gary Mullen / Alaska DNR

Much of Interior had been blanketed with thick smoke for weeks from major fires along the Taylor, Steese and Dalton highways and fire crews were stretched thin.

In the midst of Alaska's biggest season ever for wildfires, BLM intentionally set fire to the Alphabet Hills.

Then smoke from dozens of fires blew into Anchorage and the Mat-Su Valley.

"What are they thinking?" said some, complaining to news media, congressional offices, and city government.

It's a story 25 years in the making and so far the results are promising.

Tucked between the Denali and Glenn highways, the Alphabet Hills is one of the most isolated areas in south central Alaska. There are no roads, few trails and even fewer cabins. Located approximately 50 miles northeast of Glennallen and 20 miles north of Lake Louise, the area is a mixture of trees and wetlands underlain by permafrost.

All in all, it's a prime candidate to use prescribed fire to enhance the ecosystem. "Since it's so wet there most of the time, natural fire has been excluded from the landscape and the forest has turned into a decadent homogeneous stand of inaccessible black and white spruce. Commercial harvest of the stand is not feasible and mechanical treatments over such a vast area is too expensive, " said Kato Howard, state fuels management specialist for the Alaska Fire Service.

BLM, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, State of Alaska Department of Natural Resources and local Native corporations had been talking about implementing a prescribed fire in the Alphabet Hills for almost 25 years. Such a burn, done properly, would begin reducing the hazardous fuels, unlocking the nutrients stored in the wood and making them available as natural fertilizer for new vegetation. The additional sunshine and openings in the forest canopy will also allow natural reseeding by birch, a favorite food for moose.

BLM identified a 320,000-acre area in the Alphabet Hills as suitable for a prescribed fire. The area is divided into four smaller units based on natural topography that can serve as fire breaks to minimize the amount of fire line that would otherwise have to be constructed.

Prescribed fires are implemented only under precisely calculated environmental conditions such as moisture content, temperature, humidity, wind, and the weather forecast. This and other information is specified in a burn plan prepared by the BLM in consultation with a variety of state and federal agencies, Native corporations, the University of Alaska, and the public to meet management/resource goals and objectives

"Last summer it finally seemed to come together," said Gary Mullen, Fire Management Officer for Copper River Forestry "but rain put out the fire quickly and we only managed to burn about 5,000 acres." On two other occasions BLM efforts to implement the prescribed fire had to be abandoned (in 1982 and 1994) because conditions were not right.

This summer brought hot, dry temperatures and below average rainfall. Finally there were just the right conditions to get the job done. BLM set the fire Aug. 10 and it slowly burned away under calm conditions. By Aug. 20 only a few smoldering hot spots remained. In all, an estimated 41,000 acres of the 56,000 acres targeted were burned. "If we get suitable conditions again in the future, we want to burn the two units remaining. But not this year," says Howard.

"We really needed a dry year to pull this off," said Ramone McCoy, BLM's Glennallen Field Manager. "It is in an area that usually is too wet to burn. If we waited for another 25 years, we'd have a catastrophic fire. We don't want another Yellowstone,"

referring to the park that accumulated millions of acres of overmature or dead trees that erupted into unstoppable wildfires in 1988.

"The same environmental conditions for wildfires were needed for the Alphabet Hills to burn. It had to be dry," said Howard. Now cabin owners around Lake Louise can breathe a bit easier knowing a lot of nearby hazardous fuel is no longer threatening them.

Prevention also reduces the costs of suppression. In some cases BLM may elect to thin vegetation by hand or with machinery, such as when it constructs fire breaks around villages. This can cost about $3,000 an acre which is too expensive for large projects. "But a controlled burn might cost only $2 an acre. And that includes the planning and monitoring costs that go along with this. Now compare that to the millions of dollars it costs to fight a wildfire," said Howard. Fire suppression costs in Alaska this year will top $55 million for state and federal agencies. "Then there are all the property damage and disrupted lives. Wildfires in California take out whole subdivisions costing tens of millions of dollars to replace," Howard said.

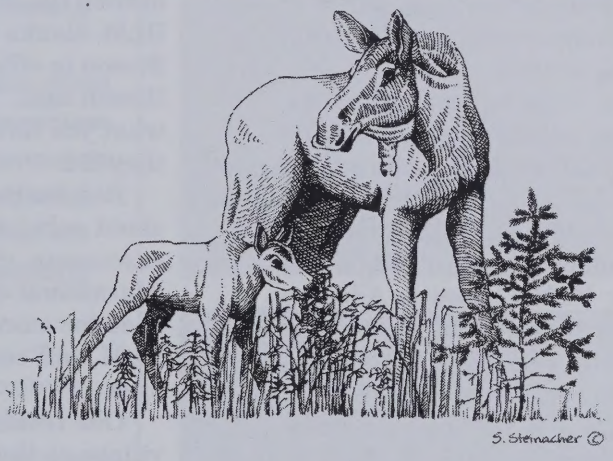
In 2004, BLM launched 18 other prescribed burns attracting little public attention, reducing fuels on 35,000 acres of military lands near Anchorage, 35,000 acres near Delta and 3,000 acres near Fairbanks. "There are lots of other projects being planned and BLM is not the only agency using prescribed fire to reduce risk. All federal land management agencies and the state have agreed to the National Fire Plan and are working to improve public safety and reducing fire suppression risk and costs through fuel reduction projects," said Howard. "We have some control if we go on offense. The fire is in control when we just play defense."

Howard said, "We have to keep this year in perspective about two things, smoke and wildfires. Although it is a record-setting year for wildfires, Alaska has approximately 365 million acres of land. Of that acreage about 220 million are susceptible to wildfire. State and federal agencies account for about 75,000 acres a year average in fuels projects but wildfires consume an average 900,000 acres a year. At this rate it would take more than 200 years to consume all the burnable acreage in Alaska.

"Black spruce, our most volatile fuel type, becomes decadent and most volatile in about 120-year-old stands. If we suppressed all wild fires and stopped all prescribed fire, we as a state would set ourselves up for uncontrollable wildfires. Breaking up the homogeneity and age classes of vast stands of black spruce reduces the chances for large catastrophic fires.

"What lessons can be learned from this? First, you may not have a choice on limiting your smoke. Secondly, not all smoke is bad; some of it may be coming from your local area suppression staff to reduce your risk to wildfires. Lastly, look outside your door or window: black spruce is a fire dependent plant species, it requires fire to open its cones. Fires are going to happen; whether you prepare for it now or later makes a very appreciable difference."

Moose Heaven



Ed Berg, an ecologist at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, has been studying a 1994 spruce burn in the refuge. He reports, "From the point of view of hungry moose in the winter, however, the burn is about as close to heaven as most moose get. These birch saplings are prime eating size and there is a virtually infinite supply of them. We saw abundant piles of winter moose pellets, so we know that the moose are putting the area to good use in the winter."

His studies indicate that birch trees produce a phenomenal number of seedlings. One study plot indicated that there were more than 1.2 million stems per acre 10 years after the fire. (There had been five times as many just three years after the fire, but the seedlings crowd each other out and the number decreases as the trees grow up.) As the birches begin to mature, the ground is once again shaded, producing the conditions for the spruce to grow, completing the cycle.

Are you Fire Wise?

Firecrews can't be everywhere at once! Every land owner must take responsibility to reduce the chance of wildfire damaging buildings and property.

For more information about what you should do, check the Fire Wise links at:
http://fire.ak.blm.gov

A time to speak and a time to listen

They traveled from Anchorage, Glennallen, and Fairbanks to the small village of Unalakleet in northwest Alaska. On a sunny afternoon in July, they gathered in the multi-purpose room of the village school. The group included BLM managers, a riverboat tour operator, the general manager of a municipal power utility, an assemblyman from Fairbanks, and a conservationist. Their purpose: to listen.

On July 29, BLM State Director Henri Bisson, three BLM field managers, and six members of BLM's Resource Advisory Council traveled to Unalakleet to meet with officials from the Native village of Unalakleet. The meeting was one step in a series of face-to-face visits over the last few years between BLM and Unalakleet tribal members designed to strengthen the government-to-government relationship between the two.

The Unalakleet River is the only national wild river within the boundaries of BLM's Anchorage Field Office. But the river is more than a designation; it's the lifeblood of the community. So after her appointment as BLM field manager two years ago, June Bailey decided to get to know this small community.

"I wanted to know what's important to the people who live in this village and depend on the river for their livelihood," Bailey said. "I want to understand how our decisions affect their way of life, so we can make sound decisions that consider their needs."

So June Bailey and her staff began paying regular visits to Unalakleet, sometimes accompanied by BLM State Director Henri Bisson and once with BLM Director Kathleen Clarke. Then late last year, BLM's Resource Advisory Council expressed an interest in visiting Unalakleet to meet with tribal representatives.

The BLM council is a cross section of public land users throughout the state who provide advice and recommendations to the BLM on lands and resource management issues. The council meets four times a year and usually makes one field visit each summer. And this is how several members of the council came to be sitting in the multi-purpose room of Unalakleet School in late July listening to the concerns of Unalakleet residents.

Native Village of Unalakleet environmental specialist Art Ivanoff opened the meeting and invited BLM-Alaska state director Henri Bisson to offer a few opening words. Bisson said, "We're here to listen to what you have to say," and listen they did.

Residents expressed concerns about subsistence harvests, public easements, river management, educational opportunities, and the need for more coordination when BLM staff conduct field work in the area.

One resident described the village as the door to the Unalakleet National Wild River, and said, "It's important to knock on that door when you come to the village." Bisson told village leaders BLM would look into establishing a formal coordination agreement with the village.

For BLM advisory council members to provide balanced, informed advice, they must first understand the various sides of the issues, including rural perspectives. The annual field visit and commu-

nity meeting provides a critical glimpse of rural life and the issues that face those most affected by what happens on BLM-administered public lands. Council members often describe the meetings as the most insightful part of field visits.

Council member Susan Olsen said the Unalakleet meeting helped her realize how expensive and difficult village life really is, and the immense impact federal agencies have on rural villages. "We need that perspective to provide counsel to the BLM," Olsen said.

Council member Sandra Key agreed: "The public meeting is the best part of this or any field trip."

Olsen and Key represent conservation interests on the Resource Advisory Council.

Key said she was moved by one family's dilemma involving lands relinquished years earlier when the claimant didn't meet filing requirements. Key said she found herself thinking, what would it hurt to grant this small parcel?

"Then I have to remind myself that it's not the federal manager's job to be 'generous' with the public estate," said Key. "It's their job to be reasonable and fair."

Key thinks the latter is the greater challenge. "My heart goes out to the families who have historic ties to properties on that wonderful river. My heart also goes out to the federal manager who must have the wisdom of Solomon to do the right thing for the public's interests and for the families," she said.

–Teresa McPherson

(opposite page) **BLM managers and members of the Resource Advisory Council vist a 1950s cabin on the Unalakleet National Wild River during the council's July field tour.**

Putting words into action

BLM's Anchorage Field Office is working on a number of follow-up items since the Unalakleet meeting.

- BLM worked with the Native village of Unalakleet to establish procedures for formal government-to-government consultation. Anchorage field office manager June Bailey will meet with Unalakleet officials in September to sign a formal agreement.

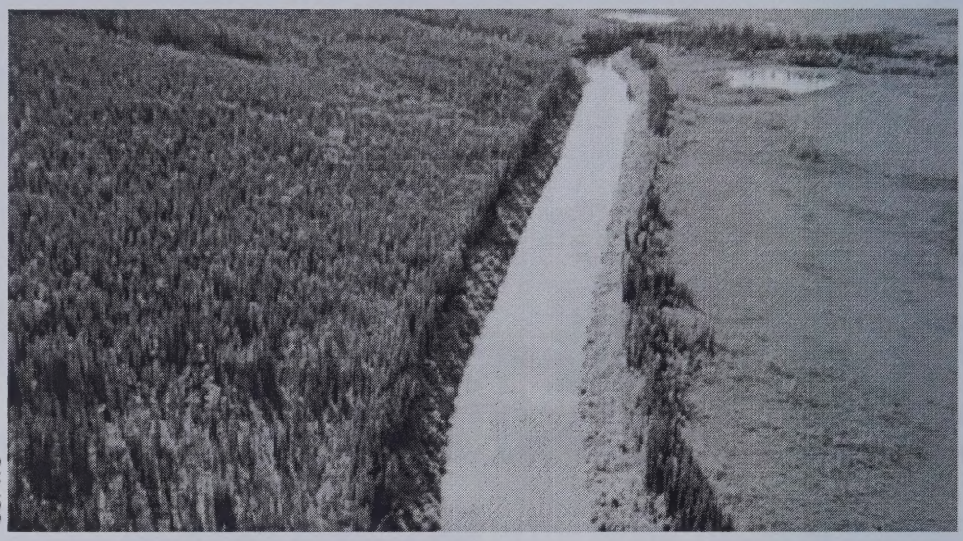
- BLM is looking at ways to partner with the village on educational programs and opportunities for village youth interested in careers in the natural sciences.

- BLM's Alaska Fire Service will contact the Native village of Unalakleet prior to spring recruitment about the possibility of hiring and training an emergency firefighting crew from the area.

(left and below) **Advisory council members, BLM managers and residents of the Native village of Unalakleet discuss issues and concerns during a community gathering in late July.**

BLM and State team up to clarify ownership of land under navigable waters

If the Bureau of Land Management hadn't issued its first recordable disclaimer on the Black River in October 2003, the newly-designated navigable waterbody would probably be like many of the other rivers that traverse the alluvial plains in northwest Alaska. Instead, the Black River earns the distinction of being the first river of what the State of Alaska hopes will be many Alaskan waterbodies to receive recordable disclaimers from the BLM.



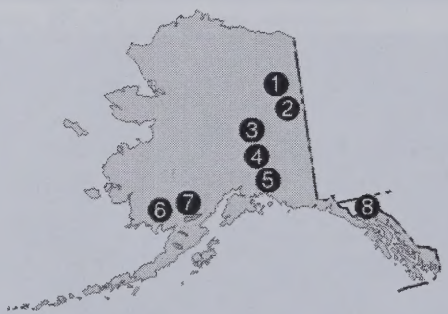
USFWS

But this comes as no surprise to the BLM. When the disclaimer of interest regulations were amended in January 2003, the BLM was assured the State of Alaska would use this process as a means to confirm its ownership of lands underlying navigable rivers and lakes in Alaska

Although title to unreserved beds of navigable waterways automatically passed to the State of Alaska at the time of statehood (Jan. 3, 1959), the State has long wanted a legal document to affirm its title to submerged lands. This was typically done through real property quiet title actions in federal courts. But the large numbers of potentially navigable waters and the high costs of litigation made it unattractive. Since statehood, courts have quiet titled about a dozen waterways in a state where there are hundreds if not thousands of navigable waterways.

Before BLM could accept the state's recordable disclaimer application on the Black River, the State had to present enough evidence supporting the State's claim that the Black River was navigable. A summary report was drafted with navigability findings. And most importantly it had to meet the federal government's criteria for navigability. The disclaimer for the Black River was issued to the State on Oct. 24, 2003 for 375 miles of riverbed underlying the navigable waters of the Black River and its tributaries. However, 109 miles of the State's application was suspended because there was not enough information on the upper reaches of the river for BLM to make a determination.

The Alaska BLM is currently the only bureau office applying the recordable disclaimer process to navigable water bodies. Three BLM staffers are processing applications and continue working with other land managers from the Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service and Forest Service to improve the disclaimer process. An infusion of $1 million to the program by Sen. Ted Stevens has been helpful. "This funding will facilitate an assistance agreement between the BLM and the State which stipulates the State does the research and prepares navigability reports and the BLM concentrates on application reviews and evaluates evidence supporting navigability of waterbodies," explained BLM State Director Henri Bisson.



1. Porcupine River
2. Black River
3. Salcha River
4. Tazlina River and Lake
5. Klutina River and Lake
6. Wood River and Lakes System
7. Kvichak River and Iliamna Lake
8. Chilkat River
   Klehini River
   Tsirku River
   Chilkoot River and Lake
   Chilkat Lake

Since the issuing of the first recordable disclaimer in 2003, BLM is presently processing 12 more applications from the State of Alaska on 25 waterbodies. For more information about recordable disclaimer applications and the process, go to the BLM website at **www.ak.blm.gov.**

The recordable disclaimers process will take some time but once they are issued, federal land managers will be able to make more sound management decisions.

–Danielle Allen

Cape Yakataga Bridge issue resolved

Dave Mushovic

The Glennallen Field Office has been coordinating the replacement of a failing bridge near Cape Yakataga, east of Cordova. The existing bridge has been severely damaged by ice and water.

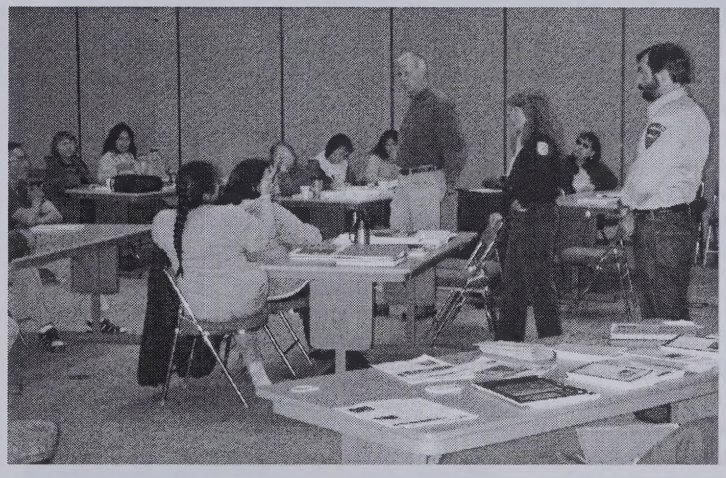
The Federal Highway Administration, through an agreement with the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, will use a $3-million special appropriation to remove and replace the bridge with a single-lane modular bridge next summer. When completed, the BLM will transfer jurisdiction to the City and Borough of Yakutat. Full and part-time residents and miners in the area are expected to use the new bridge.

BLM takes ATV safety message to rural Alaska

If you're working on a land use plan or plan to work on a land use plan; if you're a land use manager or a recreation specialist; if you recreate or live in an area that has high value recreation, you have or will soon be involved in off-highway vehicle (OHV) use and impact issues. Count on it.

OHV use is increasing, said Randy Goodwin, BLM Northern Field Office, and it is imperative to educate the public about the impacts of motorized vehicles on lifestyle. "This is especially true in the rural communities where there is increased use of all terrain vehicles using more trails. We're seeing more impacts on wetlands. This can greatly affect the subsistence lifestyle," said Goodwin.

With this in mind, Goodwin readily accepted an invitation from Anchorage Field Office manager June Bailey to join the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the University of Alaska Fairbanks Cooperative Extension Service as they gave presentations during an All Terrain Vehicle (ATV) workshop held in Bethel this summer. Goodwin said that the educational efforts were well received by several dozen teachers from Bethel and surrounding communities.



Randy Goodwin (right) **listens to the discussion at the Bethel ATV workshop.**

"Our goal is to provide communities with the information to allow them to manage OHV inventory and OHV trails, to provide access to areas while reducing impacts. They can then decide what trails to address and how to maintain them." Additionally, Goodwin said, the presenters focused on ATV safety, encouraged the use of helmets and goggles while riding ATV, and discussed options for funding through grants for future programs.

"This is the first time we (BLM) have been invited into rural communities to discuss OHVs. It is a positive step that we can expand into other areas. It is good to be able to see what the rural community needs are and how BLM involved. I think the OHV programs will grow," Goodwin said.

–Donna Gindle

Frontier Flashes

late breaking news from around Alaska

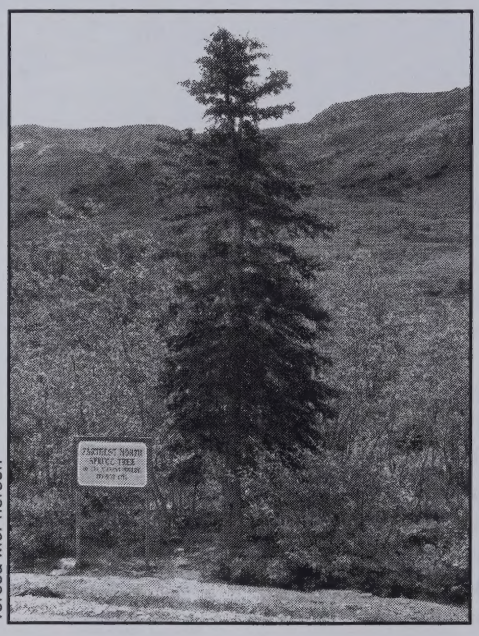
K. J. Mushovic

BLM open house set in Glennallen

GLENNALLEN. BLM will formally dedicate its new offices in Glennallen October 1. The building, which includes a meeting room that field manager Ramone McCoy has made available to the community, opened to the public in June. A brief dedication ceremony is scheduled at 9 a.m. followed by an open house until 4 p.m. A warm invitation is extended to all.

Dalton spruce tree vandalized

DALTON HIGHWAY. Sometime in July, vandals desecrated a famous 40-foot-tall landmark white spruce identified as the farthest north spruce tree along the Dalton Highway and possibly the world. A band of wood chips marked the chop marks that girdled the tree at milepost 235, effectively condemming it to a slow death. BLM botanists estimated that the tree could have been more than 270 years old and it was a favorite photo point for tourists traveling toward Deadhorse. A tour company is offering a reward for information. Call BLM rangers at (907) 271-2622.



Teresa McPherson

BLM offically dedicates Arctic Interagency Visitor Center

COLDFOOT. BLM officially dedicated the Arctic Interagency Visitor Center June 29. The center will serve visitors traveling the Dalton Highway for years to come and will also provide local residents with a meeting facility. This fall the center will remain open until September 11 on shortened hours of noon to 8 p.m. The building was specially designed to "go cold" in the winter when visitors and staff return to warmer climates. The center will reopen in May. In 2003, more than 7,000 people visited the center between June and September.

BLM selects design for new office building in Anchorage

ANCHORAGE. Anchorage Field Office field manager June Bailey signed the decision record on the Campbell Tract Facility Master Plan environmental assessment. The plan examined potential sites for a new Anchorage Field Office administrative building. Bailey selected the Meadows site plan and the concept A entrance road alignment (if the BLM is required to move the entrance road for public safety). The Meadows site plan separates the new building from the existing facility while maintaining ease of access for traveling between the buildings in the administrative complex. It provides the best aesthetic setting and offers a distinct public office building rather than an industrial complex with an office building. The siting in an undeveloped area allows helipads, other administrative buildings and the aircraft apron to remain in place. The plan calls for mitigation efforts so there is no net loss of vegetation. Building design will not begin until 2006. If funded, construction could begin in 2008. The entire EA can be viewed online at **www.anchorage.ak.blm.gov.**

BLM volunteers get national recognition

COLDFOOT. BLM volunteers Thelma and Robert Bowser received the Secretary's Take Pride in America Award for their extraordinary public service. The Bowsers have performed more than 11,000 hours of volunteer time greeting and assisting more than 60,000 visitors from around the world during their 13 consecutive summers at the Yukon Crossing contact station on the Dalton Highway. They spend the winter at home in Florida.

Donna Gindle

Public Lands Day volunteers needed in Anchorage

(above) Recreation planner Doug Ballou discusses the Viewpoint Trail improvement project with Dan Rhode from the Nordic Ski Association. Volunteers spent more than 80 hours smoothing and grooming the popular trail to benefit both winter and summer users. The public can help on other projects in Anchorage on National Public Lands Day on Saturday Sept. 18. Registration starts at 8:30 a.m. Call (907) 267-1247 for details.

BLM visible at Anchorage airport in a b-i-g way

ANCHORAGE. You can't miss reading about BLM-Alaska if you pass through the new $400-million-dollar C concourse at the Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport: a giant 60-foot long, BLM-sponsored mural depicting fall colors along the Dalton Highway greets visitors near gate C-3. A 7-foot inset panel will be changed seasonally to rotate various public service messages about BLM-managed public lands.

News you can use

Subsistence hunters may soon be able to download BLM land survey data to their GPS devices. In hopes of eventually aiding hunters with electronically available boundary information, BLM is testing a website **(http://sdms.ak.blm.gov/sdms/subsistence_gmu13.jsp)** that details an isolated tract in Game Management Unit 13, also referred to as "the postage stamp," which straddles a short portion of the Denali Highway between Paxson and the Tangle Lakes. *(Note: Federal sibsistence hunting opportunities in GMU 13 are available only to certain qualified residents of the area. For additional information on eligibility, contact the Glennallen Field Office, (907) 822-3217.)*

BLM has created a photographic database website from which the public can view, print or download historical digital images of more than 2,500 photos free of charge. Images come from across the United States between 1890 and 1970. Historic Alaska images date to 1937 and show various landscapes from many corners of the state as well as mining, surveying, reindeer herding and wildlife. The site can be reached on the internet at **www.photos.blm.gov.**

Our new look

You may have noticed this issue of *BLM-Alaska Frontiers* has a new design. We've shed our rustic Alaskana image for a satellite view of Alaska from space to emphasize another frontier, 21st century science. In future issues we will be telling you a lot more about how science, technology and BLM resource specialists team up to unlock the secrets of the public lands to help us manage them better.

Upcoming issues will feature articles on BLM-sponsored research at the Bering Glacier, early results of mining investigations in the Alaska Range, an new way to count salmon from the office, efforts at controlling noxious weeds spreading throughout Alaska, and a review of land use planning efforts.

Sign up for a free subscription to BLM Alaska Frontiers... and other publications

Many exciting and interesting things are happening on your BLM-managed public lands in Alaska. Four times a year we report on what BLM is doing on your behalf. Find out by reading **BLM Alaska Frontiers.**

If you are not currently on our mailing list, just fill this page out and mail it in. Or if you are already receiving it, check your mailing label below to see if it is still current. The Post Office will only forward your mail for a short time after which these newsletters are returned to us as undeliverable.

You can also use this form to (a) cancel your free subscription to **BLM Alaska Frontiers** if you no longer find it useful, (b) suggest topics you would like to see articles on, or (c) subscribe to our other free publications.

Name: _____

Street/box: _____

City: _____

State/zip _____

Mail this entire page to the return address below or **fax** it to the editor at **(907) 271-5421.** Be sure your current mailing label is visible.

Suggestions welcome — enclose a brief note with your ideas for future stories in **BLM Alaska Frontiers.**

Add me to your list to receive these free publications:

____ **BLM Alaska Frontiers**
(information about the BLM-managed public lands in Alaska, published quarterly)

____ **Campbell Tract Leaf**
(information about projects or events affecting the Campbell Tract in Anchorage)

____ **Fireline**
(statewide wildfire information from the Alaska Fire Service, published twice a year)

Other information on:

____ The Bay Resource Management Plan
____ South NPRA plan
____ East Alaska Resource Management Plan
____ Kobuk-Seward Resource Management Plan
____ Ring of Fire Resource Management Plan

Other action requested:

____ update my address

____ please cancel my subscription to **BLM Alaska Frontiers**

Bureau of Land Management
Office of External Affairs
222 W. 7th Avenue #13
Anchorage, Alaska 99513

OFFICIAL BUSINESS

First Class
Postage and fees paid
U.S. Department of the Interior
Permit No. G-76

BLM Library
Denver Federal Center
Bldg. 85, OC-521
P.O. Box 25047
Denver, CO 80225

BLM Alaska Frontiers

Managing editor:
Edward Bovy, (907) 271-3318
Contributing writers:
Danielle Allen
Donna Gindle
Craig McCaa
Teresa McPherson
K.J. Mushovic
Cartography:
Carol Belenski
Editorial:
Wendy Longtin

Read Frontiers in color at www.ak.blm.gov

BLM-Alaska Frontiers is published quarterly in March, June, September and December.

Text and photos may be reproduced in whole or in part. Photos may be available on request for re-publication. Please credit BLM-Alaska.

BLM-AK-GI-94-005-1120-912

Inside. . .

Our biggest fire season ever 1
White Mountains blackened 4
Alpine Final EIS 7
Alphabet Hills 8
RAC'in in Unalakleet 10
Recordable Disclaimers 12
Statewide news roundup 14